

Leadership

A Void in the Muslim Ummah

Allah SWT has created this world in perfect order; all the galaxies, sun, moon, weather, and seasons are running in order and with discipline. If we follow the system that Allah SWT created, we will flourish and prosper; whereas anytime we try to break away from this system, even if we attain temporary success, in the long run we will falter and suffer.

Allah SWT has given humans a variety of forms and personalities, but all of us are either leaders or followers by nature and by assignments that Allah SWT has allocated for us. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: “All of you are guardians and are responsible for your wards. The ruler is a guardian and responsible for his subjects; the man is a guardian of his family; the woman is guardian in her husband’s house and responsible for her wards; a servant is guardian of his master’s property and responsible for his ward. So all of you are guardians and are responsible for your wards.”¹ As a Muslim, we have to be the best follower or leader depending on our personalities and role in life. Prophet Muhammad SAW said: “Allah loves a servant who when performing a task does so skillfully.”²

In Islam, we have the best role models to follow both as leaders and followers. Rasul-Allah (SAW) was the best leader that ever existed and his *sunnah* is enough to give us all the guidelines on how to be as well as produce great leaders. Allah (SWT) chose and perfected Muhammad SAW; we can never be like him but his characters and manners are so simple yet powerful that they are a guide for people till the end of times. Rasul-Allah (SAW) was able to produce amazing leaders as well as remarkable followers; all the qualities that we will discuss in this article are driven from the methods of Muhammad (SAW). After him (SAW) we have AbuBakr (RA), ‘Umar (RA), ‘Uthman (RA), ‘Ali (RA) and ‘Umar Ibn Abdul’Aziz (R) as shining examples for the entire world. They were all unique in their abilities and techniques yet astonishingly similar in their leadership qualities.

Companions of the Prophet (SAW) used to say that the secret of leadership is to deny yourself completely; put everyone before you and think of your own interest and benefit last. In other words, a leader has to have pure sincerity. If the leader lacks sincerity then Allah will give him followers who do not have sincerity either. Similarly, if followers are corrupted, then the leader will be corrupted as well. Rasul-Allah (SAW) affirmed this statement suggesting that rulers are a reflection of the population; if people are good, the rulers appointed over them will be good and vice versa.

¹ Bukhari and Muslim

² Al-Bayhaqi

Throughout this article you will notice that the qualities of a successful leader formulate a perfect circle. All of them stem from *Iman* (faith) in Allah and the more *Iman* a person has, the more he will have leadership qualities. Successful leadership is a gift from Allah for those successful human beings who have captured their inner-selves (*nafs*) and have gained victory between them and Allah.³ At the same time for the success of any mission leaders need followers—those who are willing to obey while disregarding their own *nafs* for the sake of Allah in order to get the job done. So at any given time and in any circumstance, a leader and a follower both should be concerned about developing themselves to the best of their abilities.

Advice of a sage:

At any given time, you will either be a leader or a follower. If you are a leader follow Allah and do your best; and if you are a follower, fear Allah and don't give the leader hard time.

Leadership Qualities: Heritage of Believers

Below we will discuss the qualities of true leaders that are derived from the teachings and practices of Muhammad (SAW) and his companions.

1. Sincerity:

Sincerity is the fruit of *Iman*; a person with true faith will have sincerity towards Allah and all his actions will be for the sake of Almighty Lord. A real leader will do anything sincerely for his goal and his people while disregarding his own personal needs. Lack of *Iman* brings many diseases in a person such as half heartedness at a job, selfishness, greed, lack of communication, & dictatorial attitude. All of these stem from arrogance which is blindness from Allah.

Let's look at 'Umar (RA)'s example as a leader. 'Umar (RA) was very tough by nature but upon becoming *Khalifah*, he got up on the pulpit in front of everyone and made *du'a* to Allah and asked Him (SWT) to make him soft. He (RA) didn't hide his weakness; in fact he acknowledged it in front of everyone. This is ultimate sincerity; a person has attained this level when praise and criticism become equal in his eyes⁴.

2. Consideration:

³ Refer to article series "Journey of Victory vs. Journey of Defeat" at www.noora1.com

⁴ Throughout the article, we have used the linguistic term for masculine gender but it refers to both males and females.

Allah SWT has created every human differently with a unique set of qualities. A leader respects everyone's qualities and limitations. He cannot push people the way he wants. Companions of the Prophet (SAW) were unique and had individual qualities that were nurtured by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) who assigned them tasks based on their respective abilities. This takes humility on the part of the leader because if he is arrogant, he would want to formulate people a certain way which may break the followers' heart and soul along with wasting his own energy and time; and at the end will not bear any fruits.

3. Personal Accountability:

A leader has real love for his people. This love stems from mercy and a sense of responsibility. He leads with love and makes the followers obey him with pleasure, not with fear. The true sincerity requires the leader to have constant internal reflection to the point if the followers act up, instead of blaming and punishing them, he blames himself and says:

لا اله الا انت سبحانك انى كنت من الظالمين ﴿الابيا ٨٤﴾

“None has the right to be worshipped but You (O Allah)), Glorified (and Exalted) are You (above all that (evil) they associate with You). Truly, I have been of the wrong-doers.”

As we stated earlier everyone is a follower or a leader at any given time. You should follow the same principal on every level—be it family, job, or nation. The companions of Prophet SAW used to evaluate the status of their *iman* according to the behavior of their mules and horses. The more a person is closer to Allah, the more he will command respect and obedience from those around him, including animals. So the quality of a true believer and a great leader is that he holds himself responsible instead of others. If the situation goes wrong, he accepts full responsibility of the actions and tries to rectify the situation, not accusing or oppressing his subordinates.

4. Consultation:

Leadership is consultation. Rasul-Allah (SAW) always consulted people around him. The purpose of consultation is to unite the hearts which brings down the mercy of Allah. Allah (SWT) himself advised the Prophet on consultation and softness in the following words:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانفَضُّوا مِن حَوْلِكَ

It is part of the Mercy of Allah that you did deal gently with your followers; for if you had been severe or harsh-hearted, they would indeed have broken away from you..."
(3:159)

Once Muslims were ready to encamp while traveling and Rasul-Allah (SAW) decided to camp at a certain location; his companions asked him if this decision was based on *wahee* (revelation) or it was his own idea. When he notified them that it was his own idea they disagreed with it and suggested another location based on their knowledge of the locality. Prophet (SAW) immediately abandoned his original proposal and followed theirs. Muhammad (SAW) didn't get offended or thought his companions' disagreement a disrespectful act; again, we go back to sincerity—the purpose of leading and following is to get the job done in the best possible way.

Once the leader opens up the door of consultation, he in reality empowers everyone under his command which develops a sense of camaraderie and equal responsibility and thus produces best results. On the other hand, a leader who bosses everyone around instead of consulting them develops hatred and enmity for himself in the hearts of his followers. Rasul-Allah (SAW) said: "the worst imam is one who leads the *salah*, and people hate him."

The real wisdom of consultation is to come up with the best possible advice and solution for the goal. When everyone brings in their advice and discusses it, it not only opens up hearts and minds; it allows a discussion to take place which generates the best possible outcome. All successful major companies follow this technique where there are team or unit meetings and managers take everyone's opinion before making a final decision. This not only gives the follower a feeling of ownership of the project, it also produces love and respect for the leader.

5. Unity:

Leader unites the heart and thinking towards him; this way when people meet, all hearts are united. Allah unites the heart of the followers to the leader when the leader is sincere. Ali (RA) said: if you want to own a person and want to unite his heart towards you, drown him in your generosity. If a leader is kind and knows what his followers might need or want at any given time, he not only wins their hearts, he also wins their loyalty and time. But this, like anything else requires wisdom; if one dumps his goodness on wrong people, of course they will take advantage of it and it will not bear fruits.

6. Stability:

A leader has to have stable *Iman* (faith), temper, personality, goal, and vision. He cannot be one way today and act differently tomorrow. It will cause confusion among the followers and will remove his respect from their hearts. A leader is like a sponge that absorbs all the mess and does not allow it to spread everywhere. Even if the follower are unstable and in a state of chaos and confusion but the leader is calm, this calmness will radiate and affect others. Moodiness and enflamed temper are a sign of defeated person who does not know how to deal with the situation. If this is the attitude of the leader, than he has already failed in his task.

How a leader stabilizes his followers depends on his personality, time, situation, place, and the kind of people he is leading. The key ingredients that are bound to grant him success in this endeavor are kindness, consideration, generosity, humbleness, involving people in decision making process, sharing the profits or success with the entire group—basically the qualities of a true believer in Allah.

7. Long Vision:

A successful leader always has his eyes on the prize. There are many things that will go wrong while working on a task and there are many people who will cross their limits. What makes one organization or group different from the other is how the leader deals with situations like this. Sacrificing the ego over short term losses for the long end is always a better option. Let's take the example of a work place; if the manager gets upset with some trained workers and causes them to leave, he would have to hire new people and train them. It will take a lot of time, patience, and many mistakes before the new workers are at the level of those that were removed. This will end up costing the company more loss and suffering than if he were to let go

momentarily and save the original workers. This brings the issue back to humble and humility and elimination of ego for the higher goals.

'Umar(RA) was once delivering a speech and he had a new (*thobe*) dress on. The dress was made out of a piece of cloth that was distributed among the men of Medina, and everyone had received an equal amount. One man from the congregation got up and questioned 'Umar about the amount of cloth he had received saying it was bigger than most people's. 'Umar (RA) called his son 'Abdullah to clarify the situation who explained that due to the large size of his father, he had given his own share to him which is why it was bigger than most. The man was satisfied and sat back down. 'Umar (RA) was not the manager of a small company, he was the ruler of a strong Muslim Empire, yet his level of humility was so high that all people had the right to satisfy their questions and concerns without fear of retribution.

8. Wisdom:

Wisdom is a gift from Allah SWT; it is to act at any given time, place, and condition in a way that benefits you the most. Qur'an states:

يُؤْتِي الْحِكْمَةَ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٢٦٩﴾

He grants wisdom to whom He pleases; and he to whom wisdom is granted receives indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding. (2:269)

Ali RA said: Allah gives wisdom to whom He loves but He will not give it to four:

- The one who has love of *dunya* (this world) in his heart.
- The one who worries about tomorrow.
 - if a person worries about the future, it means that he has no trust in Allah SWT.
- Envious and jealous person.

- Rasul Allah SAW said: “*Haasid* (envious person) is the enemy of Allah.” There is a story attributed to Pharaoh of Egypt who used to build intricate buildings with hidden passages and then kill all the builders who knew about the secret passage so this way he remains the only one with knowledge of it. Once he heard a knock on one of these secret passage doors; he was very surprised and upon opening the door he inquired about the visitor. The visitor introduced himself as Satan and said to Pharaoh “you are in big trouble; I disobeyed Allah once and look what He (SWT) did to me. You call yourself the supreme Lord; you are going to be worse off than I am. He then went on to say “There is someone who is more hated in the eyes of Allah than both of us and that is a *Haasid*— someone who is not pleased with what Allah has given him and looks to others”
- The one who doesn’t rely in Allah.
 - The one who doesn’t rely in Allah is full of ego and arrogance. Every success should produce *sajda shukr* (prostration of gratitude) and every mistake should produce *istighfar* and *tawba* (repentance) as Allah is owner of all affairs.

Since Allah grants wisdom to those He loves; once a person becomes beloved to Allah, he will be granted wisdom. And those who want to become beloved to Allah have to perform actions of those whom Allah loves.

9. Prudence:

A successful leader has to maintain discretion in all his acts. This requires sincerity and respect of the environment one is in. Leader has to keep good and bad apples separated. If he mixes them together than bad apples can destroy good ones. Based on the teachings of Islam, we know that people’s hearts are contagious. A person either carries angels with him or demons and this is what they spread around them. A prudent leader will keep his strong, clean hearted followers separated and use them for specific kind of tasks. Those followers who need more spiritual cleansing and elevation will have to be dealt differently. This also requires wisdom and *baseera*.

10. Farasa/Baseera (Inner Vision from Allah):

Baseera is internal vision and ability to see hidden meanings behind apparent situations and words. It is transmitted directly from Allah SWT to the believers. Rasul-Allah (SAW) said: "Be careful of the vision and wisdom of the *Mumin*, he sees with the eye of Allah." A leader whose heart is connected to Allah can feel what's going on around him right away and makes decisions accordingly. Allah can give leader hidden messages and based on that a leader is able to feel his people; what they need, want and what pleases them.

11. Humility:

Leadership requires true humbleness and humility to Allah and people. Once a woman corrected 'Umar in the middle of a congregation over something he had said; upon which he recognized and acknowledged his mistake right away.

Where are we from the attitude of 'Umar (RA)? For us the most important thing is not right or wrong anymore; it is the satisfaction of our ego. We don't allow anyone to touch it; in fact all our decisions are focused on its satisfaction. A good leader has true humility and sincerity to Allah and he never puts his ego before the benefit of his followers and their mission.

A leader has to respect the environment, time, place, condition and those he is dealing with. *Khulafa Rashideen* (righteous caliphs) were all different in qualities and dealt with people according to their traits while holding onto certain principals. Once a man approached 'Ali (RA) during the caliphate of 'Uthman (RA) and criticized them both and compared the time with that of 'Umar and Abubakr (RA). 'Ali (RA) replied saying Abubakr and 'Umar had people like me and 'Uthman to give them advice, whereas we have people like you. We can take two points from this humorous yet important story: 1. Leader has to be humble enough to accept the advice of people around him. 2. Followers affect the leader, his decisions, and overall environment just like a leader affects his followers.

A leader has to be humble enough to accept change and respect it. Our world is constantly changing— weather changes, situation changes, hearts change, age changes, people change. Acceptance of change is the strength of a leader.

12. Fairness/Mercy:

Allah SWT suggested Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to be kind and merciful to his followers in the following words:

وَأَخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ

And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility (17:24)

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: “Love for your brother what you love for yourself.” If we as a leader and a follower implement only this principal in our lives, we will be successful at our respective tasks. As we mentioned the words of a sage earlier: “At any given time, you will either be a leader or a follower. If you are a leader follow Allah and do your best; and if you are a follower, fear Allah and don’t give the leader hard time.” If a leader loves for his follower what he loves for himself, then he will be kind, considerate, generous, easy going, compassionate; meaning he will have all the qualities that are needed to unite hearts to him. At the same time, if the follower loves for his leader what he loves for himself, he will do whatever task is assigned to him in the best possible way in order to elevate the goal and the leader.

One of the major disasters the Muslim *Ummah* is facing is lack of leadership. We, as a nation, are bereft of leaders and it is critical to fill this void. We have to go back to the true teachings of Islam and develop ourselves as true Muslim, *Mo'min* (believers), *'Abd* (slave); develop true humility, even to animals. We have to eradicate all arrogance from our hearts and return all our accomplishments to their true source—Allah SWT. A sincere leader does not look for a pat on the shoulder or acknowledgement from others. Even if people treat him low, he takes it with humility and continues doing his best since a true believer does not seek reward from anyone other than Allah. A wise person advised to “Be a rug!” A rug is mistreated and everyone walks all over it but it is the reason the rest of the house is clean. It receives all the dirt but protects everything else around it. Rasul-Allah (SAW) said: “A leader of the people is their servant”. If a person wants to be a true leader, ruling people’s hearts, he has to humble himself and serve them.

A leader has to be most vigilant of people and has to constantly water his soul and faith. He has to be physically, spiritually, and emotionally fit. He holds the responsibility of guiding and leading others on his shoulders, so anytime he acts irresponsibly, his followers will be worse. There was once a wise king who was out on a hunting expedition when his entourage realized that they were out of salt. A few people were sent out to get salt from

the nearby locality; while they were about to leave the king called them over and stressed that they have to pay for the salt. People asked him for the reason saying salt is something so insignificant and he is the king; why does he need to pay for it when his subjects will be happy to cater to him. He replied saying, if a king gets salt for free, his army will eat up the cattle for free. Meaning, any minor oppression and transgression on the part of the king will spread and be exaggerated by his subordinates until corruption becomes the norm. Therefore, we can establish that followers are the mirror of the leader. Anytime they are acting imprudently, it is the leader's fault and the right course of action for him at this time is to repent and fix himself spiritually.

Allah SWT stresses this point in the following words:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ ۗ

Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). (13:11)

An accepted leader shows humility to Allah SWT for all his success and accomplishments. The more he is given victory, the more his good qualities—humbleness, generosity, kindness, spending in the path of Allah—increase. This is the key to more success since Allah SWT promised:

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمْ لَئِن شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ وَلَئِن كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ ﴿٧﴾

And remember! your Lord caused to be declared (publicly): "If ye are grateful, I will add more (favours) unto you; But if ye show ingratitude, truly My punishment is terrible indeed." (14:7)

Shukr (gratitude) is the ornament of a believer. The more he gives *shukr*, the more his countenance, physically and spiritually, becomes beautiful. The real *shukr* is expressed through actions; actions by tongue, heart, and body. The act of tongue is to be moist with the remembrance of Allah and talking about Him (SWT); the act of heart is to hold contentment; and act of body is to be humble and show humility towards everyone.

Leadership is a skill; it is an art—either a person has it or he doesn't. A leader has real concern for his followers' welfare and has the art of making them care for him. This skill is not necessarily acquired by education, knowledge, and expertise; rather it is a gift which is given as a gift from Allah to his true slaves.

If you truly belong to Allah SWT you will be a wonderful leader and a great follower depending on your role. May Allah SWT decorate us with the qualities of true followers of Prophet Muhammad (SAW); may He allow us to be those beloved slaves of Him who when performing a task do so skillfully. May He grant us true humility which will be a cause of our elevation and success in this life and the hereafter. *Ameen.*

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